



A Winning Spirit

**KEEN
Spells
Success
For
Disabled
Athletes**

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The gymnasium at St. Louis University High School is filled with cheers. The athletes are grinning. The coaches are proud. But the excitement is not the result of a Jr. Billikens win. This is about a different kind of success: one that pairs a group of exceptional athletes with a group of dedicated volunteers and mixes in basketballs, hula hoops, scooters, whiffle balls and bats, rhythmic gymnastic ribbons and whatever else the athletes want to use to test their ability. This is KEEN (Kids Enjoy Exercise Now).

“I tell people it’s a lot like third grade gym class,” said KEEN program director, Kelle Franklin. “Our activities are varied and tailored to the athletes’ needs.” Every participant is considered to be an athlete regardless of ability, and every volunteer is a coach. Working together, one-to-one, athletes and coaches experience the best of amateur sports, taking part in the activities for the sheer pleasure of participating.

KEEN was founded in England more than 20 years ago when Elliot Portnoy, a young Oxford University Rhodes Scholar, was asked to share his love of tennis with a group of children with disabilities. Soon it became apparent that tennis was not right for every child, but participating in a sports program was as long as the sports were loosely defined. Today, KEEN is one of the largest programs of its kind in England and is spreading across America. KEEN athletes can be found in Washington, D.C.; Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Having Fun & Getting Fit

At right: Coach Stacey Murphy and athlete Alyssa Rode sled across the gym.

Above: Coach Brian Hoelscher and athlete Barret Bubenik play ball.

“There are two big reasons why people with disabilities need programs like KEEN,” said Franklin. “First, sports and physical activity are such a big part of American life. KEEN gives our athletes a chance to learn about sports and a place where they can participate in their own way. Second, KEEN is about exercise, which is the key to good health. Our current session is at capacity with 32 athletes participating. Each session is an hour long and is held on the second and fourth Sunday of the month from 2-3 p.m. We are planning to add a second session in June.” KEEN has plenty of interested athletes, but needs more volunteers. Anyone can volunteer over the age of 15. “There are no special requirements,” said Franklin, “other than a desire to help.”

Volunteer training takes place one hour before the start of each session. Each volunteer is paired with only one athlete, although some athletes may have more than one coach.



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Hockey Fun

Coach Ryan Boschert (yellow shirt) takes on Cameron Troll, Coach A.J. Parr, Brian Craig, and Zachary Schaeper.



Play Ball

Cameron Troll plays ball, while another group of athletes participate in a parachute game.

End of the Day

Coach Kim Morgan enjoys a quiet moment with athlete Pooja Shashidhara.

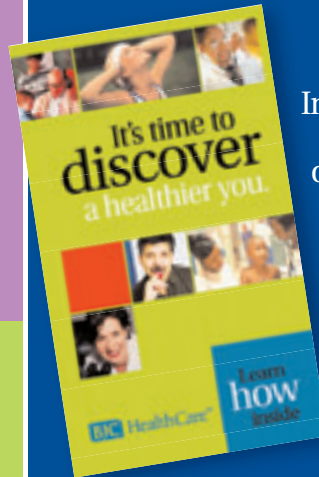


"It's all about the athlete. We do whatever it takes to help the athlete be successful and enjoy the session," said Franklin. That includes carefully matching coaches and athletes. During the training session, KEEN staff members go through the athlete profiles and talk with coaches about how to meet individual needs, especially if there are communication issues or other special concerns. But most of what takes place at KEEN is just people having fun, playing games and learning from one another.

"Our volunteer opportunities are very flexible. There's no set commitment. Just come when you can," said Franklin. But most volunteers find themselves coming back time and again to enjoy the exercise, laughter and success.

KEEN sessions will be held from 2-3 p.m. at the St. Louis University High School gymnasium on May 20, June 10 and June 24 with additional dates to be listed soon on the KEEN website (www.keenstlouis.org).

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